

WOODLAND RETREAT
SUSSEX

Height of luxury

Rachel Truman heads to East Sussex to discover that staying in a treehouse doesn't have to mean roughing it

Ariving at Fair Oak Farm at night, my partner and I have no idea what our surroundings look like. Yet as we tiptoe through the silence down the path to our treehouse, we get a sense of wide, empty space in the blanket of darkness. The next morning, we draw up the blinds and throw open the doors to gaze upon a glorious scene of uninterrupted fields, forest and gentle slopes. There is not a building in sight. Impressive, considering we are only an hour from London.

Fair Oak's two treehouse eco-lodges opened in October and were the last of the self-catering properties to be completed by owners Ian and Penny Ledger after they bought the East Sussex farm six years ago. Perched on the periphery of the gardens, and surrounded by trees, the lodges really make the most of the stunning scenery and give guests a sense of utter seclusion.

Despite my initial disappointment at not having to clamber up a wobbly ladder and there being no branches protruding into the lodge, I cheer up when I discover just how snug and immaculately finished the treehouse is. The circular room houses a queen-size bed, table and chairs, armchairs and a flatscreen TV. A bijou kitchen is tucked around one side and a bathroom the other. Mixing simplicity with a little luxury, it is a treehouse for fairweather tree-dwellers.

SURROUND SOUND

The longer we stay, though, the more we start to feel like we are actually living inside a tree. Branches tap on the windows, birds sing in surround sound, moths flutter in and the occasional unidentifiable animal scuttles overhead at night. There are a number of suspects.

The Ledgers are committed to protecting local wildlife: as well as planting more than 500 trees, they have set up rare-owl enticement nests and bird boxes. But the farm is home to animals from

more exotic climes, too. Peacocks roam free (we spy an elegant white one perching near an old, bow-top Gypsy wagon as we explore) and three kind-faced alpacas graze behind the farmhouse.

We continue our explorations with a brisk walk through Bedlam woods, just in front of our lodge. Part of an area of outstanding natural beauty, a track takes walkers on to the pretty village of Mayfield, a little more than two miles away. Our appetites get the better of us, however, so we take to the car to seek out supplies.

First stop is a cottage down the road, where we snap up a dozen eggs. Next we navigate the hedge-lined roads looking for farm shops, eventually spotting Oast Farm shop, near Buxted. Local bacon, Sussex slipcote (a sheep's-milk cheese) and a jar of blackcurrant jam join our provisions.

Heading back to Mayfield we discover more good food shops: the butchers, CL Leppards, does a great line in local meats, while Jason's of Mayfield, an upmarket greengrocers, has all manner of delicious deli treats. Shopping bags full, we pop in to the Middle House, one of the village's three pubs, for a pint. Inside the timber-framed Elizabethan building we discover a lively pub that is packed to the rafters. Even better, it sells freshly baked breads from the bar.

Back to our treehouse, we settle in for the night, watching the stars shine brightly from the terrace and listening to the occasional owl hoot. We know we are going to find it hard to fly the nest.

● Fair Oak Farm, Witherenden Road, Mayfield, near Tunbridge Wells, East Sussex (01435 884122, fairoakfarm.co.uk). Treehouses sleeping two cost from £217 for a four-night stay.



Leafy lodgings

Fancy escaping for a week to the woodlands? These peaceful retreats promise you a getaway surrounded by nature

Prices from £2,299 for a four-night midweek break sleeping eight. (08448 267723, centerparcs.co.uk)

Bouncers Farm, Essex

Stay in Gypsy wagons, a wooden trailer or pitch a tent in an apple and cherry orchard. Each July there is an alfresco opera performance, Opera in the Orchard. £12 a night a tent including one adult, each additional adult £4 a night or £3 for children. (01621 894112, operaintheorchard.co.uk).

Churchwood Valley Devon

Forest meets beach at this secluded holiday park at Wembury Bay, south Devon. Lodges nestle between trees on the hillside, many with views of the bay. Prices from £160 from Monday to Thursday. (01752 862382, churchwoodvalley.com)

The Hytte Northumberland

This Norwegian-style timber hytte (mountain lodge), with traditional grass roof, sleeps eight. Energy is renewable and native trees have been planted around the hut. Prices from £650 a week. (01434 672321, thehytte.com)

Center Parcs Nottingham and Wiltshire

The snazzy new two-storey, four-bedroom treehouses in Sherwood Forest and Longleat Forest boast hot tubs, saunas and games dens.